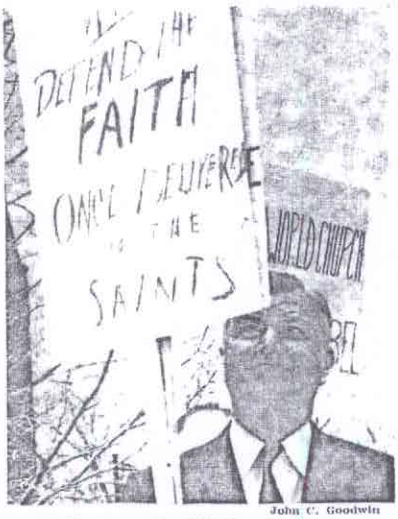
Thunder on the Right

Dr. Carl McIntire has long ruled the forces of the fundamentalist far right with almost papal suzerainty. An implacable foe of Communists, Catholics and all other "apostate" Christians, he has spent more than 30 years building a movement out of his personal antipathies. After breaking away from the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., in 1938, he helped form a new denomination, the Bible Presbyterian Church, which currently lists 55 congregations. He founded the American Council of Christian Churches in 1941 as a counter to the "Communist-infiltrated" National Council of Churches, and in 1948 he added the International Council of Christian Churches. Total claimed membership in all his organizations: 8 million.

More recently, the charismatic, 62-year-old preacher has added a college, seminary and resort hotel on the New Jersey shore to his ecclesiastical domain. But the real source of his power is his indefatigable talent for polemics. From his massive brick church in Collingswood, N.J., he produces "The 20th Century Reformation Hour," which is heard daily over some 600 radio stations. In addition, he publishes a weekly newspaper, The Christian Beacon, in which his editorial "we" is frequently indistinguishable from a papal "*nos*."

Last week, however, there were unexpected signs that McIntire was no longer in total control of his movement. In a series of articles in the Beacon, McIntire warned that officials of the American Council were covertly pushing him aside and discrediting his prophetic ministry. "There has been executed," he wrote, "what they call in the political world a coup d'état." And, in a radio broadcast, he urged his faithful listeners not to remember the ACCC in their wills.

ACCC leaders were embarrassed by McIntire's fusillade, and denied most of his charges. "We have vowed among ourselves not to damage Dr. McIntire," says Dr. Philip Clark, the council's newly elected president. "Our differences are not over doctrine or goals. It's a question of breaking out of a one-man mold."



John C. Goodwin

McIntire: Fusillade of charges

'Soft': In truth, McIntire's personal crusades overshadow the organizations he has spawned. He regularly turns up at meetings of the National Council of Churches and other ecumenical groups to lead placard-waving fundamentalist pickets. "Dr. McIntire seems to think that those who don't want to march in picket lines as he does are compromising our whole stand," says Dr. John E. Millheim, 34-year-old general secretary of the ACCC. "But there are many ways to protest, and some of us don't want to picket."

McIntire also fears that the ACCC leadership is going "soft" on other conservative Christians who do not adhere to the letter of his own version of fundamental Christianity. But out of their experience as observers at meetings of more liberal church organizations, council officials have learned to be more tolerant of apostate Protestants. "He's afraid," points out Millheim, "that any type of contact with people on the other side may cause us to be more influenced by them than they are by us."

But it is McIntire's pervasive influence over the entire movement which is more at issue. Thousands of Bible Belt Protestants accept his radio program and his newspaper as the voice and word of righteousness. "The Christian Beacon and the 20th Century Reformation Hour," says McIntire, "are God's gift to us." Yet, for all of that, they are not officially associated with the ACCC. As a result, council officials complain that McIntire's vitriolic assaults on the civil-rights movement, the Federal government and all other "threats" to America are accepted as the positions of the ACCC.

Personal: In particular, council president Clark charges that foreign members of the International Council of Churches "have a lot of trouble separating McIntire's personal statements from the official positions of the council." For example, the Middle Eastern Bible Church—whose membership is composed of Christian Arabs—withdrew from the ICC because McIntire strongly supported Israel in the recent war against the Arab states. Similarly, Clark complains, African Christians have taken growing offense at McIntire's militant opposition to the U.S. civil-rights movement.

"Dr. McIntire is the only one of his kind," says Millheim, "and none of us would ever presume to replace him. My one regret is that he has chosen to take a family matter and hang out the dirty wash before the public." Yet to the doughty radio preacher, more is at issue than a family squabble. "Our whole cause is at stake," he has told his followers. "God has placed me in the position where I am."